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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 19 of General Assembly resolution 52/211 B of 19 December 1997, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it every three months during its fifty-second session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The report, which covers developments since the report of the Secretary-General of 17 March 1998 (A/52/826-S/1998/222), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on developments in Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

2. A situation of rough military parity prevailed throughout the period covered by the present report. While fighting diminished in March/early-April, flare-ups gradually increased along the front line north of Kabul and in the Kunduz region. A moratorium on new military offensives was accepted by the two sides and was fairly effective during the Steering Committee meeting, held in Islamabad from 26 April to 3 May 1998.

3. However, fighting resumed shortly after the suspension of the Islamabad meeting, with the Taliban making fresh efforts to capture territory in the Kunduz area from positions held by Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Fighting also erupted north of Kabul in late May with one of the heaviest artillery and rocket duals in recent memory. Commander Massoud's forces also launched several rounds of rockets into Kabul International Airport on 21 May.

4. New fighting began between forces loyal to General Abdul Rashid Dostum and the Taliban in the north-western province of Badghis on 30 May. General Dostum, with the help of several commanders who had switched sides, was able to force the Taliban back across the Murghab River. A Taliban counter-attack recaptured some but not all of the lost ground.

5. One particularly tragic episode occurred on 17 May when Taliban aircraft bombed Taloqan, the provincial capital of Takhar, hitting a market and killing over 30 civilians and injuring many more. It was also reported that rockets apparently fired by the United Front (UF) hit residential areas of Kabul, also killing civilians and destroying more of the already devastated Afghan capital.

6. The flow of arms, money and other supplies into Afghanistan from outside has continued unabated during the past three months. United Nations officials witnessed a number of air deliveries of weapons and ammunition by unmarked aircraft to UF bases in the north. Reliable sources stated that those resupply flights were occurring at a rate of four to five sorties or more per week. There were also persistent, though not fully confirmed, reports of deliveries of tanks and jet fighters to the northern forces, and it was widely known that one UF faction has been regularly allowed to use an airfield outside Afghan territory as a shelter base.

7. As for the Taliban, international media have continually reported that large amounts of military supplies, including tanks and armoured personnel carriers, have been purchased outside the region and delivered to the Taliban, apparently through a neighbouring country. Although this has been strongly denied by the Taliban and others who claim that the militia already had enough hardware in Afghanistan to continue the war for years to come, several sources in the region maintain that the Taliban indeed received those supplies. In addition, there is little doubt that the Taliban continue to enjoy free fuel and lubricant supplies from outside. Resupply of military stocks by land has been difficult to prove conclusively; however, UNSMA has recently been informed by reliable witnesses that the Taliban received a large delivery of military supplies loaded on 200 trucks. United Nations personnel were reliably informed of, and in one case directly witnessed, the presence of foreign military instructors giving training and guidance in camps of both Afghan sides.

8. The internal political situation among the Afghan factions has further complicated prospects for the resumption of peace talks. There have been persistent reports about fighting between, and even within, the factions in the north. Fragmentation within UF has been one of the main barriers to effective peace talks with the Taliban. Their inability to ensure security and safety in Mazar-i-Sharif and other areas has also prevented the United Nations from resuming full-fledged activities in northern Afghanistan.

9. The Taliban have so far appeared to be more united. However, there were a few incidents of unrest in Taliban-controlled areas, which resulted from the resistance of families to the forcible conscription of local youths and the harsh interpretation of the shariah, or Muslim legal code, enforced by the militia. There are also persistent reports about tensions within the Taliban leadership and battle fatigue among their rank and file.

10. The political situation outside Afghanistan offers a slightly more promising picture, as countries in the region started talking to each other more frequently. Of particular significance are increased contacts between the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which could help to formulate a solid international framework involving key regional players to address the Afghan conflict. I particularly welcome the visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi and Mr. Alaeddin Broujerdi, the special envoy for Afghanistan of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to Saudi Arabia in March and to Pakistan in June for talks on issues including Afghanistan.

11. Also encouraging was the fact that Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Secretary-General Azzedine Laraki has maintained high-level contacts with the concerned Governments in the region. During talks in the Islamic Republic of Iran with President Mohammed Khatami and Foreign Minister Kharrazi in May, Mr. Laraki stressed the importance of settling the Afghan conflict through joint OIC-United Nations efforts.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

12. The activities of UNSMA during the reporting period focused on intra-Afghan dialogue between the warring factions, which raised hopes for an end to nearly 20 years of warfare in Afghanistan. However, what appeared at one time to be a promising initiative for the dialogue ended after the collapse of face-to-face meetings of the main Afghan factions on 3 May in Islamabad.

13. Originally a Taliban idea endorsed by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and accepted on behalf of the United Front (formerly the Northern Alliance) by President Burhanuddin Rabbani in early January 1998, the proposal took shape as a proposed commission of ulema, or religious scholars, to settle the Afghan conflict in the light of the shariah. However, no progress was made until, once again, Prime Minister Sharif intervened two months later, in March, by inviting Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, head of the Taliban shura in Kabul, to Islamabad and obtained from him an agreement in principle for the convening of a Steering Committee in preparation for the ulema commission.

14. My Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, accompanied by Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani, the Permanent Observer of OIC to the United Nations, negotiated the arrangements with Mullah Rabbani in late March to convene the proposed Steering Committee composed of the Afghan factions in late April. Ambassador Bill Richardson, the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, visited Afghanistan on 17 April, further elaborating on the understandings reached by Mr. Brahimi with the Afghan parties, and raising hopes for a productive intra-Afghan dialogue. Both sides made commitments to Mr. Richardson that they would not initiate any new military offensives during the Islamabad meeting. After some discussion, and with my concurrence, the parties agreed that the meeting should take place under United Nations and OIC auspices.

15. At the opening session, on 26 April, under the co-chairmanship of Mr. James Ngobi, Acting Head of UNSMA, and OIC Assistant Secretary-General Ibrahim Saleh Bakr, Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan inaugurated the

meeting on behalf of Prime Minister Sharif and congratulated the 14-member Afghan Steering Committee on having shown the political will to hold face-to-face meetings. The Foreign Minister stated that expectations for the meeting and for peace in Afghanistan were high.

16. After three days of debate on the definition of ulema, the two sides finally settled on a compromise, agreeing in principle to form an ulema commission of 20 persons from each side whose credentials neither side would be allowed to challenge. The compromise was reached with timely assistance from the Government of Pakistan as well as from the embassies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan and the United States.

17. With the achievement of that breakthrough, it was all the more disappointing that the Steering Committee adjourned sine die on 3 May without completing its work. The Committee failed to conclude the debate on the other items on the agenda, and left the date and venue for the ulema commission undecided. The question of the Taliban blockade against the Hazarajat region proved to be bitterly contentious. The UF delegation demanded an unconditional and immediate lifting of the blockade, while the Taliban offered to lift the blockade only for medical supplies. The meeting finally collapsed when UF refused to accept an alternate Taliban delegation after four of the five original delegates, including its head, failed to return from consultations in Kandahar. The United Nations/OIC co-chairs urged the two sides to return as soon as possible to complete the work of the Steering Committee and to maintain the moratorium on new military offensives.

18. Despite the efforts of Prime Minister Sharif and his administration and representatives from other countries, as well as the United Nations and OIC, to revive the Steering Committee, Taliban leaders in Kandahar informed a visiting UNSMA team on 17 May that they had abandoned the idea of an ulema commission as a forum of intra-Afghan talks. Charging bad faith on the part of the United Front, they urged the United Nations to find a new basis for negotiations. Equally critical, UF leaders accused the Taliban of walking out and of refusing to negotiate a broader agenda in the Steering Committee, in particular their demand to lift the Taliban blockade of Hazarajat.

19. Pleas by the United Nations, OIC and concerned Governments to the Afghan factions to maintain the moratorium on new military actions fell on deaf ears. In late May, intensive fighting erupted north of Kabul and in the Kunduz region, with each side accusing the other of starting it. Supported by an unceasing flow of arms, ammunition and other war-making matériel to both sides, the Taliban and UF resumed their efforts to achieve their goals by force. In those circumstances, I issued a statement on 19 May expressing my deep concern at the Taliban decision to abandon the ulema process, calling upon them to reconsider their position and requesting both sides to honour their previous commitment to refrain from new military offensives.

20. In the wake of the collapse of the Steering Committee meeting, which was followed by the re-intensification of fighting, UNSMA has begun a fresh round of talks with the faction leaders to explore possible new avenues to restart face-to-face talks. In those discussions, both sides encouraged UNSMA not to give in to frustration and to continue the United Nations peacemaking efforts. Taliban

leaders in Kandahar made it clear that they did not believe that their northern opponents would ever accept the ulema commission idea as a way of solving the conflict.

21. UNSMA has been counselling a step-by-step process. Urging the Taliban to find ways of building bridges of confidence across the ethnic and ideological divide, UNSMA continues to advocate that the Taliban cease using United Nations humanitarian aid as a weapon against their Hazara compatriots.

22. With the resumption of factional hostilities, UNSMA continues to maintain useful contacts with other, non-warring Afghan factions and political leaders, as well as civic associations, women's organizations and non-governmental organizations, both inside and outside Afghanistan. The United Nations supports the calls of those independent Afghans, including the leader of the National Independent Front for Afghanistan, Pir Gailani, and the group led by Mr. Abdul Haq and Mr. Hamed Karzai, as well as the Council for Understanding and other groups, to put an end to the fighting. The United Nations also takes note of their idea of convening a genuine loya jirgah (grand assembly) to promote a political settlement. This informal, time-honoured Afghan method for settling disputes continues to deserve attention.

IV. MY SPECIAL ENVOY

23. I sent my Special Envoy, Mr. Brahimi, to Afghanistan and some of the neighbouring countries between 20 March and 15 April. Prior to his arrival in Islamabad on 20 March, Mr. Brahimi attended, on my behalf, the twenty-fifth meeting of OIC Foreign Ministers, which took place between 15 and 18 March in Doha, Qatar, and held talks with the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other concerned Governments.

24. During his mission, Mr. Brahimi, accompanied by Mr. Lamani of OIC, undertook wide-ranging consultations on the situation in Afghanistan. In Islamabad, he met with Prime Minister Sharif, Foreign Minister Khan, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Siddique Kanju, Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmad and Additional Secretary Iftikhar Murshed. He also met in Islamabad with Mullah Rabbani, Mullah Wakil Ahmed and other Taliban leaders. The Special Envoy visited Peshawar and Lahore to meet with various Pakistani officials and political leaders as well as Afghan personalities, representatives of the Afghan parties, refugee groups, women's groups and non-governmental organizations, both international and Afghan.

25. Mr. Brahimi visited Uzbekistan between 31 March and 2 April for talks with President Islam Karimov and Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov. He then visited Turkmenistan from 2 to 5 April and was received by President Saparmurad A. Niyazov and Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov. During his stay in Ashgabat, he also met with Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, Mr. Karim Khalili, leader of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, Mr. Mohammad Razem, a representative of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah, a representative of the Jamiat-i-Islami, Mr. Hashimi Jawid, a representative of the Harakat-e-Islami, Mr. Mustafa Kazimi, a representative of the Hezb-i-Wahdat (Akbari) and other United Front leaders.

26. On 9 April, my Special Envoy went to Kabul and discussed with Mullah Rabbani and other Taliban leaders how to proceed with the idea of a Steering Committee for preparations for an ulema meeting. Mr. Brahimi's tour in the region ended with a visit to Tehran from 11 to 15 April, where he met President Khatami, Foreign Minister Kharrazi and Mr. Broujerdi. He also met some Afghan political, religious and civic personalities as well as representatives of refugee and women's organizations.

27. The objective of those contacts was to urge greater cooperation among Afghanistan's neighbours - particularly the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan - to curb the flow of arms and ammunition to the Afghan factions. Emphasizing that point in remarks to the news media in Islamabad as well as in Tehran, my Special Envoy stressed the obvious fact that arms and ammunition could reach the Afghan factions only through the territory or airspace of neighbouring countries.

V. ACTIVITIES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Meeting of States with influence in Afghanistan

28. In order to bring the latest developments, in particular the breakdown of the ulema process, to the attention of a broader group of Governments, I asked the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs to convoke a meeting on 1 June of the Group of 21 Member States with influence in Afghanistan. The meeting was attended by China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and Uzbekistan, as well as by OIC.

29. The delegations were unanimous in reconfirming their support for the work of the United Nations and of Mr. Brahimi in cooperation with OIC. Many of them welcomed the direct involvement of OIC in the United Nations efforts, and in particular the recent attempt to get Steering Committee talks started. The delegations expressed disappointment with the breakdown of the Islamabad meeting intended to lead to ulema talks. There was widespread concern about reports that both sides were abandoning the moratorium on new military offensives, and there were calls for them to refrain from any new military offensive.

30. The delegations supported my approach to the Afghan conflict, maintaining that the international community should speak with one coherent voice. In that context, many of them saw the usefulness of discussions under the "Six plus Two" formula, and a suggestion was made that the Six plus Two group should be expanded. The group comprises the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan - China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - as well as the Russian Federation and the United States. Some delegations touched on the necessity of imposing an arms embargo on Afghanistan as a way to curb the flow of arms to the warring factions. In the humanitarian field, the delegations congratulated the United Nations on the Memorandum of Understanding signed with the Taliban and for overcoming some of the obstacles to the provision of assistance to Hazarajat. Many delegations voiced deep

concern at the pernicious role played by drug trafficking and by drugs produced in Afghanistan.

31. Prior to the Group of 21 meeting, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs briefed the Security Council on 21 May on United Nations peacemaking efforts and the breakdown of intra-Afghan talks in Islamabad. The Council authorized its President to make an oral statement to the press deploring the intensified fighting and calling upon the parties to return to the bargaining table and to remove restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

32. In addition, Mr. Brahimi and the Under-Secretary-General have held five meetings of the Six plus Two group since October. The group reached agreement on a common approach reflected in a set of talking points, which specify basic principles for a settlement of the Afghan conflict. The text of the talking points was attached to my previous report (A/52/826-S/1998/222, annex). However, the United States is the only member that has so far been actively using the talking points in its contacts with the Afghans. I am looking forward to seeing similar action by the other members of the group, as well as by other Member States with influence in Afghanistan.

33. The group has continued to discuss how a mandatory arms embargo could be imposed in an effective and even-handed manner. Most members of the group share the view that any type of embargo would be ineffective unless the countries in the region and beyond talked to each other and trusted each other to implement it genuinely, although some have argued that an embargo under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations would in fact be both feasible and effective. I note at this juncture that some members of the group suggested that the countries concerned should adopt a political declaration, committing themselves not to allow their territories to be used for shipments of arms into Afghanistan. A number of members also suggested that a high-level meeting of the Six plus Two group should be held in the region in the near future.

34. It is also noteworthy that groups of Member States and individual Member States that are not members of the Six plus Two group but that are nevertheless concerned, have been actively cooperating with the Six plus Two group in facilitating the United Nations peacemaking activities in Afghanistan. For instance, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have formed a group and, together with the Russian Federation and the United States, are coordinating their activities with the Six plus Two group.

VI. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A. Humanitarian situation

35. The humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate in parts of the country with the onset of spring and the eruption of fighting in the north-eastern province of Kunduz, as well as in front-line areas north of Kabul. The situation in Mazar-i-Sharif remained tense, causing further deterioration in the socio-economic condition of civilians. Insecurity still prevents United Nations agencies from returning to Mazar-i-Sharif.

36. While still recovering from the damage caused by the February earthquake that struck the remote and mountainous region of the Takhar and Badakhshan provinces, a more powerful earthquake, measured at between 6.9 and 7.1 on the Richter scale, struck the same north-eastern region on 30 May, killing 4,000 people and injuring or rendering homeless at least 50,000. Additional casualties from injury, exposure, lack of water and disease were expected owing to the extremely rugged terrain, bad weather and lack of helicopters and fuel. As of 8 June, humanitarian organizations, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and non-governmental organizations from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan supported by donor Governments were mounting massive relief operations. Two United Nations disaster assessment and coordination teams were on the ground to strengthen the field coordination capacities. Action by the humanitarian organizations has saved many lives, although relief personnel at the scene were frustrated by not being able to reach some of the most remote areas in time. Elsewhere, severe spring flooding hit the central, western and south-western regions, wiping out large agricultural areas. The United Nations and non-governmental organizations have been rehabilitating irrigation works and farmland and providing fertilizer and seeds.

37. In the central highlands of Hazarajat, tens of thousands of civilians are at risk as a result of severe food shortages caused in part by the continued blockade of the region by the Taliban forces to the south and the lack of supplies from the northern provinces due to continued insecurity and looting. The World Food Programme (WFP) successfully delivered limited shipments of wheat to two affected areas of Hazarajat under a temporary, Taliban-arranged lifting of the blockade in late May/early June.

38. WFP estimated that 167,000 people in the region faced acute food shortages. The 1,000 tons initially allowed by the Taliban would add to the 1,700 tons of wheat and potatoes already purchased locally. These were estimated to be sufficient to sustain the vulnerable populations for one month; there is still an urgent need to bring a further 7,500 tons into the area for the next three months. Efforts to obtain security clearances for the routes from the north so far have failed. I call upon all Afghan factions to lift unconditionally any blockade of humanitarian relief supplies, particularly those destined for vulnerable populations.

39. On 24 March, the United Nations suspended its assistance activities in southern and south-western Afghanistan, including the Kandahar region. The suspension resulted from the increasing tendency of the authorities to interfere with United Nations programme design and implementation and an upsurge in harassment of United Nations officials, including an incident in which a United Nations representative was physically assaulted by a senior Taliban official in Kandahar.

40. In early May, a high-level United Nations mission visited Kabul to negotiate humanitarian issues with the Taliban authorities. After 10 days of negotiations, led on the United Nations side by the deputy to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, a 23-point Memorandum of Understanding was signed - the first such document signed by the United Nations and the Taliban. The agreement lays out codes of conduct for both the United Nations and local authorities,

sets up a mechanism for joint collaboration and resolution of problems and deals in a preliminary way with gender issues. As a result of the agreement, the United Nations decided, on 28 May, to lift the suspension of its programme in southern and south-western Afghanistan. The United Nations and other humanitarian organizations look forward to improved understanding by the Taliban of their responsibilities towards humanitarian personnel to enable needed assistance to reach their own people.

41. The third meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group was held in London on 5 May, co-chaired by the United Kingdom and United States Governments. Representatives from the United Nations, non-governmental organization coordinating bodies, non-governmental organizations, ICRC/International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and major donor countries attended the meeting. The Afghanistan Support Group discussed recent developments in Afghanistan and strongly endorsed the new common programming approach for assistance to Afghanistan. Phased implementation of common programming will begin in July.

42. During the past several months, the Office of the United Nations for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan Mine Action Programme cleared 7 square kilometres of minefield and 3.7 kilometres of battlefield. Mine-awareness activities have reached nearly 160,000 people so far in 1998. Innovative efforts were undertaken to expand the level of mine-awareness training available to women and girls, including training at health clinics, local mine-awareness committees and husband and wife training teams.

43. On refugee repatriation, nine groups of Afghan refugees, totalling 6,526 persons, returned from Pakistan to eastern Afghanistan under the new group repatriation scheme of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This significantly boosted returnee figures, which currently stand at more than 20,000 - double the number for the same period in 1997.

44. Regarding the 1998 consolidated appeal for assistance to Afghanistan, as at mid-May, only 13 per cent of the requirements were covered by pledges and contributions, which is substantially lower than previous years' pledges and contributions at the midpoint of the period. Increased donor support is urgently requested.

B. Human rights

45. I remain convinced that the serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law allegedly committed in Afghanistan in 1997 warrant urgent action on the part of the United Nations. For that purpose I have been in close contact with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva.

46. OHCHR dispatched in May an exploratory mission to northern Afghanistan in order to determine ways and means of launching a full investigation into the alleged incidents of serious human rights violations in 1997. The mission will soon make recommendations to OHCHR. Preliminary indications show that there is sufficient evidence to recommend that an investigation of the allegations take

place and that it be done properly and at the earliest possible date. The investigative team or teams would comprise human rights as well as forensic components.

VII. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

47. The key to ending the Afghan tragedy lies in whether or not the international community has the resolve to address its external aspects, namely, the continuous foreign interference in the form of providing arms and other supplies to the warring factions. For such interference to end, the regional powers need to talk to each other and build mutual confidence. Together with the United Nations and OIC, other countries with influence in Afghanistan and the region should make even greater efforts to assist them in that regard.

48. Countries in the region and beyond have recently heightened the level of the attention they pay to Afghanistan. This, combined with the renewed efforts of the United Nations and OIC, led eventually to the convening of full-fledged talks between the warring factions. However, the talks were indefinitely suspended in early May, following which the Taliban announced that it had decided to abandon the ulema process as a forum for intra-Afghan talks.

49. The suspension of the dialogue in Islamabad and the apparent start of the annual spring offensives are alarming developments. Much to my regret, they are further evidence that, despite their claims to the contrary, the Afghan factions are either not ready for serious peace talks or, worse, are determined to pursue the mirage of a military solution. It is impossible not to draw the conclusion that some countries in the region, which support one Afghan faction or another, are supplying armaments to them despite repeated pleas made by me, the General Assembly and the Security Council to halt the flow of arms into the country and despite their own calls for an "arms embargo" on Afghanistan.

50. A major handicap to peacemaking efforts remains the absence of a coherent approach to the problem, as well as a lack of political will on the part of those countries with a determining influence on the warring factions. While Afghanistan itself shows typical "failed-State" symptoms, in which the armed factions are unwilling to opt for peace, major powers have stayed away from the conflict since the end of the cold war. What has ensued since then is the emergence of regional players more assertive than before and intent on filling the vacuum.

51. To date, those players have not been able to rise above their perceived national interests to begin to consider the Afghan question in terms of the interests of the region as a whole, in spite of overwhelming evidence that the Afghan conflict is causing immense damage to the fabric of society in many of those same neighbouring countries. Those countries, however, have yet to overcome their mutual distrust and agree on a common platform for the settlement of the Afghan conflict. That is the reason for the unabated supply of arms into Afghanistan, which, in turn, has enabled the warring factions to frustrate repeated international mediation efforts by staying away from serious peace talks. The latest casualty of this is the Steering Committee meeting in Islamabad.

52. In addition to appealing, once again, to the Afghan factions to respect the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Afghans and return to the negotiating table without delay, I call upon the regional powers to intensify their contacts on Afghanistan - either through the United Nations and OIC or on a bilateral basis. I also appeal to those that are not directly involved, but are nevertheless concerned, to help the United Nations to encourage the regional powers to talk to each other. The United Nations, together with OIC, are ready to offer them opportunities to enhance their mutual trust so that they can assist the people of Afghanistan and save the entire region from the real danger of the many spillover effects of the conflict.

53. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to note that there is keen and growing interest among Member States on the issue of Afghanistan and in the formulation of a common political approach to it, which the United Nations is trying to develop. Aside from the Six plus Two group and those directly cooperating with it, there are many countries and organizations that have shown willingness to help settle the Afghan conflict. For instance, the European Union has adopted a common position on Afghanistan, and its Presidency has painstakingly brought it to the attention of all the Afghan parties and interested capitals. I also noted in particular that others, including Egypt, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Sweden and Turkey, have shown increasing interest in the question and have extended valuable help to the United Nations in facilitating its efforts in Afghanistan.

54. Despite all the difficulties, the United Nations will continue addressing the Afghan question vigorously. In close coordination with the Special Envoy, who will continue to address the external aspects of the conflict both from New York and in the region, UNSMA will maintain close contact with the Afghan parties and personalities to persuade them to agree to such measures as a ceasefire, an exchange of prisoners and the lifting of all restrictions on the shipments of humanitarian supplies throughout the country.

55. On a separate but related track, major efforts are currently under way in Afghanistan to enhance the international community's effectiveness in responding to this most complex of emergencies. Sustainable and just peace in Afghanistan depends, among other things, upon the international community's adopting a coherent approach in which political and assistance objectives reinforce each other, and which allow it to speak with one voice on matters of policy and principle. This has led to the formulation of a strategic framework for Afghanistan, which is based on the need for greatly increased cooperation within the United Nations family, as well as new working arrangements between the United Nations and its assistance partners, including Afghans, non-governmental organizations and donors. I am greatly encouraged by the progress being made, as part of the overall strategic framework initiative, to formulate a clear common programming approach for the implementation of international assistance, as well as by the strong support that has already been given to this approach by the donor community.

56. In closing, I wish to thank my Special Envoy, Mr. Brahimi, and the personnel of UNSMA, including its Acting Head, Mr. Ngobi, for their impressive efforts, in particular during the difficult time of the intra-Afghan talks in Islamabad. I should also like to express my deep appreciation to the United Nations Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator, Mr. Alfredo Witschi-Cestari, and to all the dedicated and courageous staff of the United Nations family working on behalf of the suffering people of Afghanistan.